The Blue Vanga *Cyanolanius madagascarinus* on Grand Comoro

by M. Louette & M. Herremans

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Until recently, only 2 specimens of the Blue Vanga *Cyanolanius* (=*Leptopterus*) *madagascarinus* had supposedly been collected on Grand Comoro. The first one is the type of *C.m.comorensis* (Shelley), which was taken by Kirk and is now in the British Museum (BMNH) collection, Tring. A second one is mentioned by Milne-Edwards & Oustalet (1888) as having been collected there by Humblot, without any further reference. It is not mentioned in their 1885 and 1887 papers, although Shelley (1912) attributes it to their first publication. It is not even certain that this specimen was ever in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle (MNHN), Paris, where in any case it cannot be traced, despite a recent search by Dr C. Erard, and where it had not been found in 1959 by C. W. Benson and Dr J. Dorst. Nor could it be found either in the Koninklijk Belgisch Instituut voor Natuurwetenschappen (KBIN), Brussels or in the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie (RNL), Leiden, 2 other museums holding specimens by Humblot; nor, indeed, among yet further Humblot holdings in the BMNH and the University Museum of Zoology (UMZ), Cambridge (respectively Sharpe 1906: 354, 390, 437; C. W. Benson).

Benson (1960) re-allocated Kirk's specimen to Moheli, because he was unable to find the species on Grand Comoro and found it commonly on Moheli. Indeed, some other "Grand Comoro" allocations by Kirk are certainly erroneous, including the type of *Zosterops maderaspatana comorensis* Shelley from "Grand Comoro", certainly an error for Moheli. However, in June-July 1974, D. A. Turner and A. D. Forbes-Watson (*in litt.*) did, in fact, observe Blue Vangas on Grand Comoro.

On 3 August 1981, Louette had a few glimpses of a bluish bird, hidden among foliage, at a locality known as Malakoff, roughly at 11° 39′ 30″ S, 43° 19′ E on the northern flank of Mount Karthala, at c. 900m a.s.l. Finally, on 15 August 1981, above Mvouni, on the western slopes of Mount Karthala, again at an altitude of 900m, 2 Blue Vangas were seen in a party of birds (including at least also *Coracina cinerea* and *Terpsiphone mutata*) by F. Schoeters and the 2 authors. One of them was collected. The vegetation at both these localities was degraded forest, with underlying banana cultivation. The species must be much less common on Grand Comoro than on Moheli, where Benson found it plentiful; and now that it has been found on both islands with certainty, the question arises as to whether Benson (1960) was correct in re-allocating Kirk's type specimen of *comorensis* to Moheli, and the taxonomy on the species on these 2 islands as well as Madagascar needs reconsidering.

It must first be emphasized that the series collected by Benson on Moheli (*comorensis*), all of which have been re-examined, shows that Moheli birds are quite different from the Madagascar population of the Blue Vanga; so much

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This paper was completed with Con Benson's approval before his much lamented death and we are particularly pleased to have acknowledged a man who has done so much to increase scientific knowledge of the birds of the Comoros and elsewhere.

so that it prompts us to describe further differences, in aggregate suggesting that the 2 populations might even belong to different species. Though the colour in males (bright blue above, bright white below) is similar, the females on Moheli and Madagascar are strikingly different; the bill is much longer in Moheli birds, likewise the tarsus (see below), and the proportions are quite different (Benson 1960); and on Moheli the black mask is much more restricted in males and totally absent in females. Other colour differences also are mentioned by Benson, and we would add that Moheli males lack the blue and black "knees" of Madagascar birds (replaced by white). Hartlaub (1877) described this character in the Madagascar bird, but it has not been mentioned in the recent literature to our knowledge. The adult male depicted in Schlegel & Pollen (1868) shows also white feathers above the tarsus, but there is reason to believe that this is a mistake and that the artist had only Madagascar material before him.

Another particularly striking difference between *madagascarinus* and *comorensis* is the proportionate length of the undertail coverts to the length of the rectrices. This can be measured as the distance from the tip of the longest undertail covert to the tip of the longest rectrix, the skin being kept well flattened, though one must allow for possible differences in method of preparation. However, a comparison of a sample of Madagascar Blue Vangas (including 2 ♂♂ prepared by Benson's skinner) and Benson's Moheli birds provides the following figures (in mm):

Madagascar. 7 ♂♂: 30.1 (29.0–31.0); 5 ♀♀: 30.3 (29.0–31.0)

Moheli. 5 ♂♂: 17.0 (15.0–19.0); 5 ♀♀: 19.1 (17.5–23.0)

Our Grand Comoro bird scores 15.5, thus agreeing closely with Moheli birds on this character. Yet another difference between *madagascarinus* and *comorensis* is in the tail pattern. In *comorensis* the proximal three quarters of both inner and outer webs are blue and only the apical quarter is blackish, giving the appearance of a broad dark terminal band; *madagascarinus* in contrast has a greater part of only the outer webs blue, resulting in a somewhat more blackish, less banded pattern. In this feature the Grand Comoro bird again agrees with *comorensis*, the type of which, it must be emphasized, matches in all respects the 5 other males from Moheli.

Unfortunately our Grand Comoro specimen is not in fully adult dress. At the time of skinning it was sexed "? ♀", but it can be assumed to be a male in view of a few bright blue (adult) feathers appearing on the crown and mantle. Furthermore, it had the irides pale blue, as in males of *madagascarinus* and *comorensis*, not brown as in females (Benson 1960; Benson *et al.* 1977). Evidently erroneously, the iris is given as brown in an illustration of the adult ♂ of *comorensis* (Shelley 1900) and blue for both sexes of *madagascarinus* illustrated in Schlegel & Pollen (1868). In view of the striking difference in bill length from *comorensis* (18.5 as against 20.1 mm, see further below), we think Benson (1960) was correct in re-allocating the type of *comorensis* to Moheli. We therefore take great pleasure in naming the Grand Comoro specimen:

Cyanolanius madagascarinus bensoni subsp. nov.

Diagnosis. In bill length intermediate between *C.m.madagascarinus* and *comorensis;* total culmen 18.5 mm as against an average of 17.3 in both sexes of *madagascarinus* and 20.1 mm in both sexes of *comorensis*. Bill decidedly more robust than in *madagascarinus,* although not much longer. In plumage in all

respects seemingly nearest to *comorensis* although there is no similar aged specimen of this race available.

Distribution. Only known from slopes of Mount Karthala, Grand Comoro Island.

Type. Only presently known by the holotype, No. 81-52-A-102 in Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika, Tervuren, Belgium. From above Mvouni, Grand Comoro, at 11°42′45″S, 43°17′30″E, at approximately 900m a.s.l., 15 August 1981.

Measurements of type (in mm). Wing (chord) 86.5, tail 62.5, total culmen 18.5, tarsus 21.0.

Further material examined (measurements in mm):

C.m. madagascarinus. Many specimens from Madagascar in BMNH, KBIN, MNHN and RNL. Measurements taken from a sample of skins (mounted specimens average shorter in wing and tarsus but agree in bill and tail lengths and distance of rectrices tips to longest undertail coverts): 6 adult ♂♂ (BMNH nos. 1931.8.18.3181, 3191, 3205, 3214 and 1959.5. 4555, RNL 6880): 8 adult ♀♀ (BMNH nos. 1931.8.18.3165, 3187, 3204, 3210, 3212; MNHN nos. CG 1932/2386, 2390, 2391). Mean and range: 6 ♂♂, wing 89.6 (87.5–91.0); tail 65.2 (60.0–68.0); total culmen 17.3 (17.0–18.0); tarsus 19.3 (18.5–20.0); 8 ♀♀, wing 88.2 (85.5–91.0); tail 65.1 (62.0–69.0); total culmen 17.3 (16.5–18.0); tarsus 19.7 (18.5–20.5).

C.m. comorensis. 6 ♂♂, 5 ♀♀ (i.e. all the material used by Benson (1960) re-examined, namely the ♂ type plus 2 ♂♂, 3 ♀♀ in BMNH, 3 ♂♂, 2 ♀♀ in MNHN). Our measurements of mean and range are: 6 ♂♂, wing 95.6 (92.0–98.0); tail 65.5 (63.0–68.0); total culmen 20.1 (19.5–20.5); tarsus 22.6 (21.5–23.0): 5 ♀♀, wing 90.9 (86.5–94.5); tail 64.1 (62.0–67.5); total culmen 20.1 (19.0–20.5); tarsus (4 only) 22.1 (21.0–22.5).

Further remarks. The foregoing figures for *madagascarinus* and *comorensis* agree quite closely with those of Benson (1960), although he did not give any for the tarsus.

Apart from the diagnosis of *bensoni*, the following is a fuller description of the holotype (not fully adult):- Upperparts lilac blue, crown somewhat darker, with a few bright blue (adult) feathers appearing on crown and mantle. Inner webs of inner secondaries blue, like outer webs (like *comorensis,* inner webs not black as in *madagascarinus*). Underparts white, a few buffish feathers on flanks. Black mask just starting to appear. Tail feathers with square tips, not pointed as in very young specimens of *Cyanolanius*, and with buffish fringes. Iris pale blue. Legs grey-blue. Bill with pale base to both mandibles, tips dark. One may conclude that *bensoni* agrees well with *comorensis* in plumage characteristics but has a definitely less robust bill, intermediate in size between the 2 other races. Some doubt may persist as to the bill size in the adult, but I have measurements from 4 immatures of *madagascarinus* (mounted) in RNL, certainly somewhat younger than the holotype of *bensoni,* averaging 17.1 (versus 17.3 in the adult, see above) showing that this possible difference is insignificant.

The RNL has a mounted specimen, with no other data but "♂" and "Madagascar", possibly ante-1830, which agrees in most characteristics indeed with an adult ♂ from Madagascar. However, its bill is rather long (18.5mm) but less robust than in the type of *bensoni*. Its underside is washed

buff as in females of *comorensis*. It could possibly originate from still another population.

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Nesting of the Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgus tracheliotus* in Oman

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The status of the Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus* in the Arabian Peninsula has for long been obscure. The bird's main base is in Africa, where it has declined markedly in the north (Cramp & Simmons 1980). In Israel the large breeding population discovered by Professor H. Mendelssohn in 1954 had declined to about 3 nesting pairs in 1980 (Bruun 1980, 1981 and Y. Leshem), and only 2 in 1981/82 (H. Mendelssohn *in litt.* to Dr B. Bruun).

Meinertzhagen (1954) had no reports from the Arabian Peninsula, but I found one dead between Aden and Little Aden on 3 March 1962; in North Yemen it has been seen in December (Thiollay & Duhautois 1976); in Saudi Arabia, where there is now a record of nesting in central Arabia in 1947 and where it may still breed (Jennings 1982), it is a rare winter visitor to northern Hejaz and central Arabia (Jennings 1981); in the United Arab Emirates there are 5 records of these vultures in November and January (Bundy & Warr 1980).

In Oman, its status has been partly obscured by confusion with other species, and searching for the birds in the mountains is difficult. It is certainly a winter visitor, and though a small resident population has been suspected (Gallagher 1977) this has not been proved until now.